

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



Henry V. Peters House

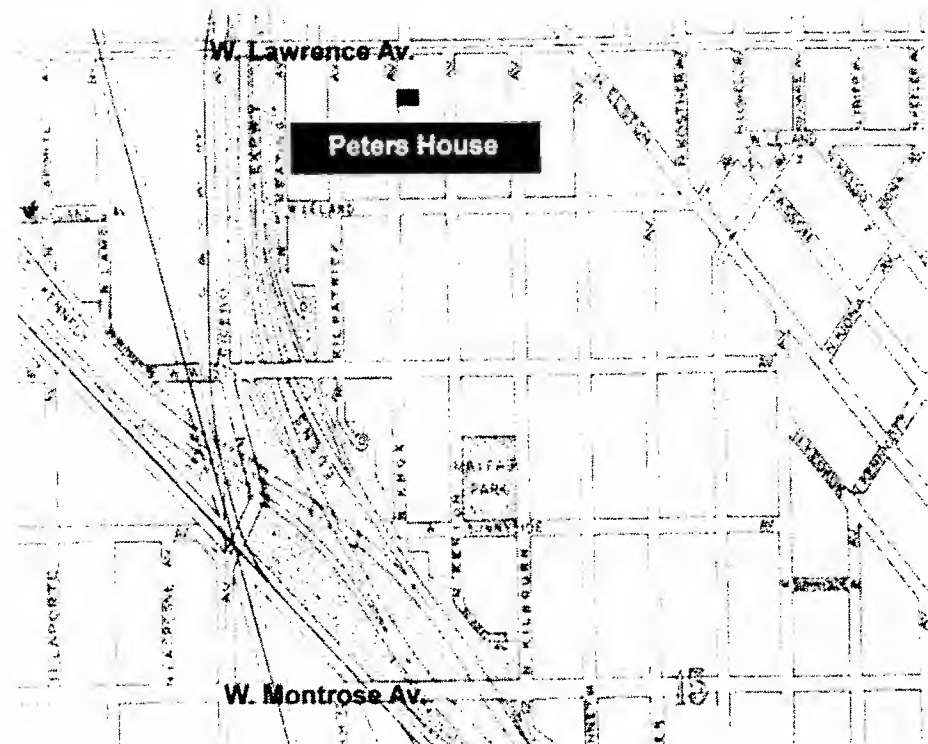
4731 North Knox Avenue

Preliminary Landmark recommendation approved by
the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, November 6, 2003



CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Denise M. Casalino, P. E., Acting Commissioner



Cover: The Peters House is a stucco over frame building designed in the innovative Prairie style (top). It features a distinctive arrangement of windows executed in a bold pattern of geometric shapes (bottom).

Above: The Peters House is located in the Mayfair neighborhood on Chicago's Northwest Side.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

HENRY V. PETERS HOUSE

4731 NORTH KNOX AVENUE

BUILT: 1906

ARCHITECT: WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN

Located in the Mayfair neighborhood of Chicago's Irving Park community area, the Harry V. Peters House is an excellent example of Prairie-style architecture. The Prairie style was an innovative architectural style pioneered in Chicago during the late-1890s and early-1900s. Constructed in 1906, the Peters House typifies the Prairie style, featuring stucco construction with contrasting dark wood trim, a ribbon-like arrangement of casement windows, deep eaves, an original attached garage (a very early example of an attached garage), and an open, I-shaped plan.

The Peters House is also significant as the work of important Prairie-style architect Walter Burley Griffin. Griffin was a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright, internationally recognized as the principal innovator of the Prairie style. Griffin is himself internationally known for his distinctive Prairie-style designs, as well as his contributions to the field of city planning. The vertical expression and symmetrical composition of the Peters House was a hallmark of Griffin's work and demonstrates his skill in adapting Prairie-style principles to a relatively small urban site.

CONSTRUCTION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PETERS HOUSE

The Peters House is located in the Mayfair neighborhood of the Irving Park community area on Chicago's Northwest Side. Irving Park's first permanent settlement occurred in 1869 when the Stephen A. Race family decided to subdivide their farm when the Chicago and North Western Railway agreed to build a station at Irving Park Road. The new subdivision began to draw residents from nearby Chicago and by 1875 there were some 60 homes in the fashionable suburb. Other settlements in the area also grew up around railroad stations, among them the 80-



Top and above: The Peters House is a small, one-and-a-half-story stucco over frame building designed in the Prairie style.

acre suburb of Montrose (now Mayfair) which was subdivided in 1875 near Cicero and Montrose avenues. The Mayfair settlement became part of the City of Chicago in 1889 and quickly merged with the Irving Park and Grayland communities developing to the southeast.

Shortly after establishing his own architectural practice, architect Walter Burley Griffin received a commission to design a house for Harry V. Peters, a developer of the Mayfair subdivision. Constructed in November 1906, one of Griffin's earliest Prairie-style designs emerged (it remains in stark contrast to the more traditionally-styled homes built as part of the subdivision). Characteristic of his personal expression of the style, the house is distinguished by casement windows decorated with wooden mullions and clear glass, the use of tent ceilings and an interest in diamond-shaped forms.

The Harry V. Peters House is a small, rectangular building which displays a high quality of craftsmanship and an exceptional degree of integrity. Typical of the Prairie style, the building is without applied ornament, deriving its visual appeal from its overall form, contrasting colors and textures, and unusual window patterns. Constructed of stucco over frame with contrasting dark wood trim, the house is basically a symmetrical composition with a vertical emphasis similar to many of the architect's other Prairie-style designs. The building is comprised of a central one-and-one-half-story "block" and two flanking single-story wings, one forming an enclosed porch to the south, the other an attached garage to the north. A series of three moderately pitched gable roofs sheathed by asphalt shingles with deep eaves cover the entire building. Casement windows mark each of the corners of the building's central mass, while dramatic diamond and pentagonal-shaped windows divided into a series of bold geometric shapes (comprised of triangles, hexagons, pentagons, and parallelograms) mark the side gable ends. A very short, almost concealed, corbelled-arch covered passage separates the house and its attached garage, providing access to the garage and the house. The small, attached garage accommodates a single automobile and directly faces the street.

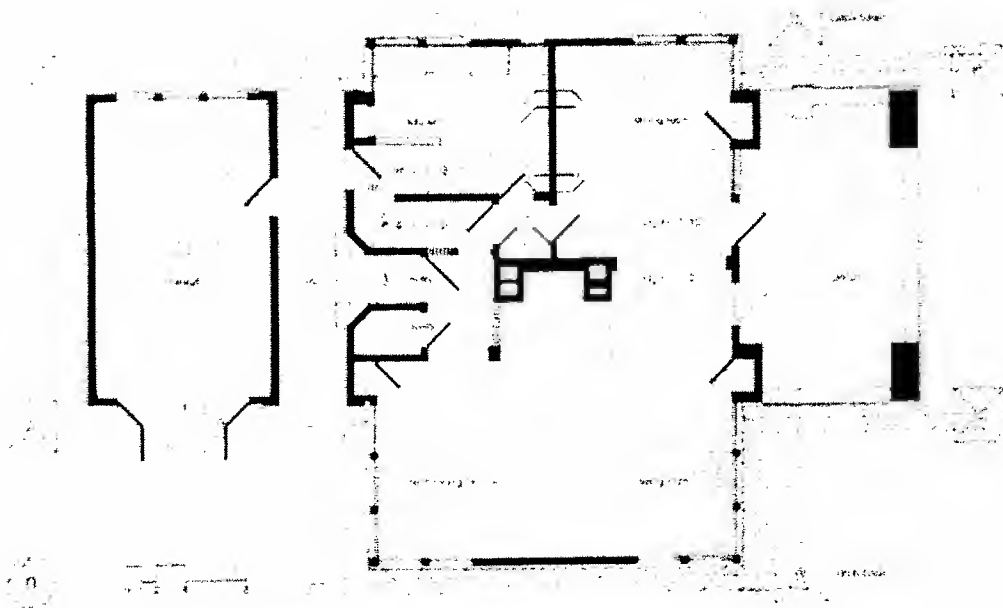
The interior plan and finishes of the Peters House are typical of the Prairie style. The house's first floor is designed around an "open" or L-shaped plan. It features a small entry, a living room, and dining room arranged around a central fireplace, and a kitchen. The living room is covered by a vaulted or "tent" ceiling, a trademark of many of Griffin's Prairie-style houses, making the moderately-sized room appear much larger than it really is. Pentagonal windows set in each of the room's gabled ends also increase the feeling of size. Other original features of the first floor are vertical wood lattices at the house's entry, a built-in desk in the living room, and a similar built-in cupboard in the dining room. The kitchen occupies its original location in the house but has been modernized. A small, short stair leads to the second floor which contains three small bedrooms and an office. The largest of the bedrooms features a dramatic diamond-shaped window and a tent ceiling. Walls throughout the house are of plaster, painted white, and accented by very dark wood trim. Most floors are exposed hardwood. Contemporary reproductions of historic light fixtures are found throughout the house. The house also has a full basement.



Top: Striking corner window groupings (with unusual fixed transom panels above) of the Peters House are characteristic of its Prairie style detailing. Bottom: The front (west) elevation of the house.



Top: The Peters House includes an attached garage, an original feature of the house (and a very early example of an attached garage) which faces the street. Bottom: The rear (east) elevation of the building includes a projecting one-room later addition by noted Prairie School architect Barry Byrne.



Top: The living room and central hearth of the Peters House. Bottom: The house's original first-floor plan with its innovative "open" or L-shaped arrangement of the living and dining room is closely associated with the Prairie style.

According to architectural historian and leading Griffin scholar Paul Kruty, the L-shaped or "open" plan found in the Peters House had particular importance to the subsequent development of the Prairie style. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright popularized this type of plan with his design for an inexpensive "fireproof house" that appeared in a *Ladies Home Journal* article in April 1907. Kruty argues in his book, *Walter Burley Griffin in America*, however, that "the evidence strongly suggests that [the plan] was the brain-child of Griffin," noting that this type of floor plan was first used by Griffin in 1906—a year before Wright's published plan—for the design of the Peters House. Also according to Kruty, Wright rarely used the open plan in his subsequent designs, whereas it became a staple of Griffin's works. The open plan soon became a standard and popular feature of many other single-family American residences for generations, whether they were designed by other prominent architects of the Prairie style or used by builders who recognized its value and incorporated it into stock plans for mass-produced houses.

Another very innovative feature of the Peters House is its attached garage. As Virginia and Lee McAlester note in their book, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, when automobiles first became common in the decade between 1910 and 1920 they were universally housed, as horses and carriages had been before, in detached, external garages. Beginning in the 1920s there was an accelerating trend to house automobiles within portions of, or extensions to, the main house. The Peters House garage predates this national trend toward integral garages by more than ten years and may be, as Paul Kruty observes in *Walter Burley Griffin in America*, one of the earliest examples of an attached garage in architectural history. In addition, it is further distinguished as such an early example for its association with such a relatively small house intended for a middle-class family.

The building's peaked or "tent" ceilings are also a historically significant stylistic element of the Peters House. In addition to increasing the house's verticality, they allow the unusual asymmetric placement of boldly geometric transom windows which mark the ridge of the rooms they open into. A "tent" ceiling is one of Griffin's favored spatial motifs, creating an expansive sense of space within modestly-budgeted houses. The Peters House appears to be the earliest house where Griffin used "tent" ceilings. Other significant houses by Griffin with such ceilings include the Ralph Griffin House (built for the architect's brother in 1909) in Edwardsville, Illinois; the Carter House (1910) in Evanston, Illinois; and the twin Comstock Houses (1911-12), also built in Evanston.

The Peters House has been previously recognized for its architectural significance. The building was included in the *AIA Guide to Chicago*, was prominently featured in *Walter Burley Griffin in America*, a comprehensive look at Griffin's career in the United States, and was color-coded "orange" in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey.



Top: Chicago's Robie House (1910), one of the seminal buildings of the Prairie style, designed by its acknowledged originator, Frank Lloyd Wright. Bottom: The Emery House in Elmhurst, designed in the Prairie style by Wright protegee Walter Burley Griffin. Note the house's vertical emphasis in marked contrast to the horizontality of the Robie House.

THE PRAIRIE STYLE

The Peters House is an excellent example of the Prairie style of architecture, an innovative architectural style pioneered in Chicago during the late-1890s and early-1900s. According to Frank Lloyd Wright, the acknowledged originator of the style, the Prairie style was developed as "a modern architecture for a democratic American society," a goal espoused by many progressive architects at the turn of the 20th century. In an architectural age dominated by period revival styles, Prairie-style designs were truly innovative, high-quality, and free of any historical precedents. The resultant buildings brought international acclaim to their architects and to the Chicago region, where many Prairie-style designs still can be found.

The core concept of the Prairie style was that of creating organic, aesthetically and functionally unified structures from inorganic parts, and to imbue structures with a sense of visual dynamism that was not beholden to historic architectural styles. The style was dependent on the careful integration of all aspects of design: plan, site, space, elevation, materials, finishes and texture.

Architect Louis Sullivan initially nurtured this philosophy in the expressionism of his late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century architecture. A group of "next-generation" architects, many of whom had trained in his office, including Frank Lloyd Wright, and others trained by Wright himself such as Walter Burley Griffin, used Sullivan's personal theory as a point of departure for their own designs. Although there are distinguishing characteristics in the works of each of these designers, it is important to note that they all shared an antipathy for historical references in architecture. They believed that reliance on previous designs implied pre-ordained notions of what a building should look like.

The Prairie style was genuinely contemporary, rejecting historical styles in favor of straightforward forms and detailing based on the inherent visual qualities of building materials. Ornament is spare and often found in window detailing executed in either decorative stained or leaded glass or simpler wood mullions arranged in abstract geometric patterns. As its name suggests, the Prairie style evokes the imagery of the Midwestern prairie through its predominately horizontal form and integration with the landscape. Prairie-style buildings are generally characterized by broadly projecting eaves, low hip or gable roofs, powerful horizontal lines, and simple geometric shapes. Ribbon windows with wooden casements reinforce the style's horizontal theme which is sometimes further developed by dark wood stripping that continues the sill line around buildings. Plaster over wood frame construction allowed the style's fullest expression, but brick is also used as a building material, both alone and in combination with wood-frame construction. Residential Prairie-style buildings are frequently anchored around prominent flat chimneys and are spatially characterized by an open, free-flowing plan.



Architect Walter Burley Griffin (left), the designer of the Peters House, was a master of the Prairie style. Some of his notable designs in the Prairie School style in Chicago include the Tolles House located in the Beverly neighborhood (middle) and the Gauler Twin Houses in the Edgewater community (bottom). Characteristic of Griffin's personal expression of the Prairie style, all three buildings have a vertical emphasis.



ARCHITECT WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN

Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937), the architect of the Peters House, is regarded as one of the masters of the Prairie School of architecture, an innovative architectural style developed in Chicago and its suburbs. Griffin was born in the Chicago suburb of Maywood and raised in Oak Park. After initially considering a career in landscape gardening, Griffin set out to be an architect and studied architecture at the University of Illinois.

Following his graduation in 1899, Griffin immediately began his career working for two of Chicago's most significant progressive architects of the times. He began work as a draftsman for Dwight Perkins in Steinway Hall, sharing space and ideas with other notable Chicago School architects such as Robert Spencer, Henry Webster Tomlinson, Birch Long, Irving K. and Allen B. Pond and Frank Lloyd Wright. Two years later in 1901, Griffin joined Frank Lloyd Wright's studio in Oak Park, which Wright had established in 1895. While in Wright's employ, Griffin became the office manager and construction supervisor for many of Wright's projects and helped with the designs of a number of important residential and commercial designs, including the Huertley House (1902), Oak Park; the Larkin Building (1903), Buffalo, NY; and Unity Temple (1904), Oak Park. Commenting on Griffin's significance to the studio in general and to Wright in particular, architectural historian H. Allen Brooks wrote in *The Prairie School* that Griffin "served as a useful lens through which Wright could re-examine his own ideas." Other architects employed by Wright at the studio at the time were Marion Mahoney (whom Griffin married in 1911), John Van Bergen, Barry Byrne, and William Drummond.

After five years with Wright, Griffin established his own architectural practice in 1906, where he quickly developed his own distinctive architectural style. Some of the features he used were based on elements characteristic of the Prairie style that he had worked on with Wright, such as the use of large, projecting corner piers and bands of windows just beneath the roof eaves. However, unlike Wright, whose Prairie style designs usually featured low, horizontal silhouettes, Griffin emphasized verticality in much of his work. Many of his residences, for example, have "tent-like" gable roofs with very deep eaves that combine to give a strongly vertical emphasis to their compositions. The Peters House was one of Griffin's first commissions after establishing his own office.

Between 1906 and 1915, before leaving the United States for Australia to oversee the construction of the capitol plan of Canberra, which he had designed, Griffin completed over 100 designs, 75 of which were built. The great majority of his commissions were for residences in Chicago and its suburbs. Among the most notable designs of this period are the Carter House (1910) in Evanston; the Tolles House (1911), located in the Longwood Drive District, a Chicago Landmark; the Mess House (1912) in Winnetka; and the Melson House (1912) in Mason City, Iowa. Two of Griffin's more distinctive non-residential projects from this period are the Stinson Memorial Library (1913) in Anna, Illinois, and the Cornell Store and Flats (1912) in Chicago. By 1912, Griffin had gained a



Top: The living room of the Peters House with its soaring vaulted or "tent" ceiling and dramatic pentagonal window set in the room's gabled end. **Bottom:** The house's dining room with its built-in cupboard to the left.

national reputation through the publication of his innovative designs in such magazines as *Architectural Record*, *House and Garden*, and *Country Life in America*. An entire issue (August, 1913) of the *Western Architect* was devoted to Griffin's work.

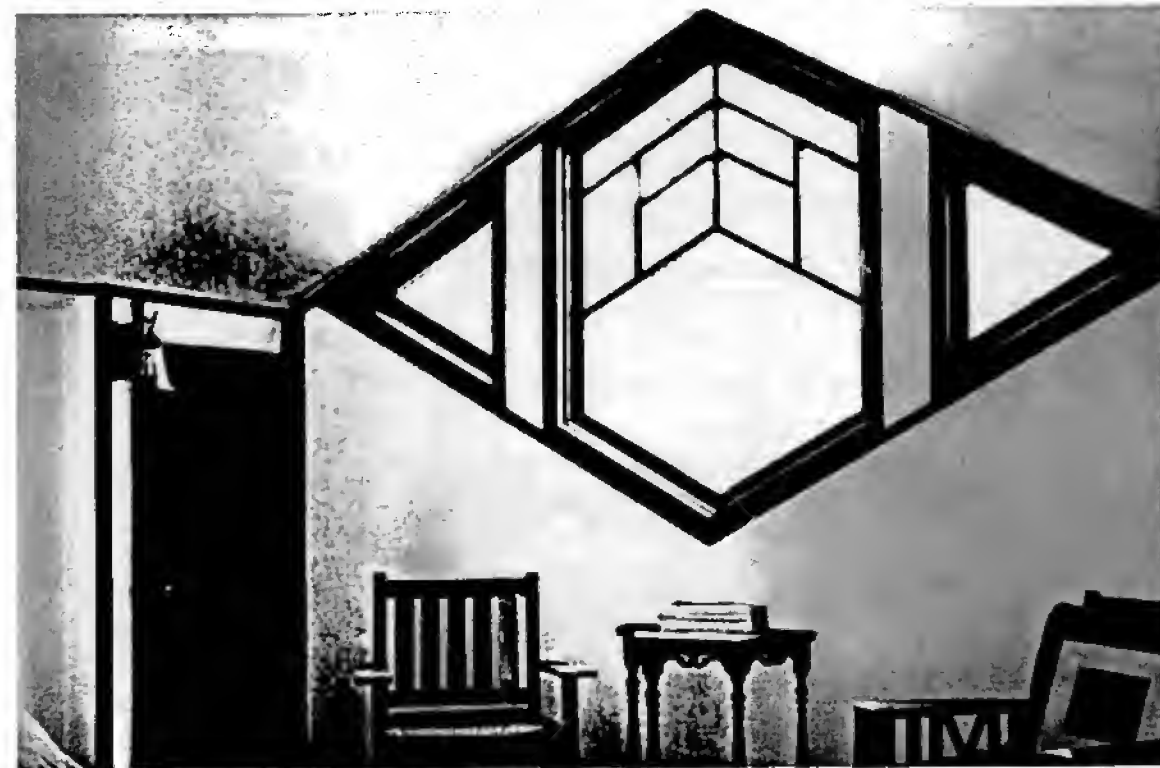
In addition to producing single designs for clients, Griffin's practice was unusual for a Prairie-style architect in that he often worked with real-estate developers and contractors on designs for multi-unit speculative housing. According to one of his biographers, architectural historian Donald Leslie Johnson, it was this direct relationship with developers that enabled Griffin to create plans for duplicate designs, including paired houses and groups of houses. Unlike the often-complex and asymmetrical plans of such Prairie-style architects as Frank Lloyd Wright, Griffin's designs usually are symmetrical in their composition, perhaps owing to his academic training at the University of Illinois.

This interest in "symmetrical balance" led Griffin to create one of the most distinctive design types of his practice: sets of paired houses that are mirror images of one another. Notable designs of this type include the Gauler Twin Houses (1908) in the Edgewater community (a Chicago Landmark); the Orth Twin House in Winnetka (1909); and the Comstock Houses in Evanston (1912). A larger group of residences Griffin designed for a single developer were 12 small residences built between 1909 and 1913 in the Beverly community, including seven in the Walter Burley Griffin (West 104th Place) District (a Chicago Landmark).

Like his other designs, the Peters House illustrates Griffin's expert ability to work well in the Prairie style regardless of the scale of the building. The modest Peters House, like the Gauler Twin Houses and the houses in the West 104th (Griffin) Place District, is well-proportioned, and displays a careful use of materials and a fine attention to details, especially in its windows, just as do his larger buildings such as the Emery House (1903) in Elmhurst and the Carter House (1910) in Evanston. The Peters House is the earliest example of his work in Chicago and is one of the earliest examples anywhere of his solo career. It contains many of the features that would become hallmarks of his work.

Early in 1912 Griffin won an international competition to plan Canberra, the new federal capital of Australia, and in 1915 he relocated to that country permanently to oversee the development of his plan. Starting with the "Garden City" concept of strict separation of functions within a community, Griffin's plan adopted a geometric formalism. The main streets of the city were to radiate from focuses—the houses of parliament, a municipal center, and a commercial district. The plan also featured a strong landscape emphasis, both in the preservation of the site's distinctive topography and native vegetation.

Although Griffin ultimately lost control of his plan for Canberra, he spent the last 20 years of his life in Australia and India, where he designed more than 100 buildings and dozens of other projects. Most of these were residences, although he also designed a movie palace in Melbourne, Australia (1921-24), a newspaper plant in Lucknow, India (1935), and a series of 12 highly innovative designs for the Reverberatory Incinerator and



Typical of the Prairie style, the Peters House derives much of its visual appeal from its unusual window patterns. Top: A pentagonal window in the house's living room. Bottom: A diamond-shaped window in one of the house's upstairs bedrooms.

Engineering Company in Sydney and Melbourne (1929-37). His architectural contributions to Australia have over time brought recognition to him as one of Australia's most significant architects, including his image on an Australian postage stamp.

During this period, Griffin moved away from the stucco-and-wood-frame construction of his early designs toward masonry materials that were more in keeping with the native landscapes of Australia and India. These designs included blocky sandstone structures, poured concrete forms, and prefabricated "knitlock" blocks – the latter invention being contemporary with Frank Lloyd Wright's famed textile block designs of the 1920s.

Cast in the enormous shadow of Wright, however, the accomplishments of Walter Burley Griffin are often overlooked. Yet, as Paul Kruty has stated:

His whole career was defined by a unity of purpose. Griffin never wavered from his goal of creating an organic, decorated architecture for the twentieth century. Of all the architects of the Prairie School who were practicing at the turn of the century, only three stayed loyal to their ideals and fought to their dying days for their personal visions of modern architecture. Two of them—Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright—have been immortalized among the legion of great architects. It is time to accord Walter Burley Griffin a place near them.

LATER HISTORY

In 1918, a small, one-story addition designed by Prairie School architect Barry Byrne was made to the rear (east) elevation of the Peters House. Of stucco construction with contrasting dark wood trim, the addition respects the design of the original building in details, materials and massing and is practically indistinguishable from the historic structure. In 1959 the house's original lot was shortened from approximately 150 feet in length to its present 80 feet by the subdivision of the lot to the south of the house. This area, originally occupied by the house's garden, now includes two contemporary-style apartment buildings.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, object, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Henry V. Peters House be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- The Henry V. Peters House was designed in the innovative Prairie style, an architectural style developed by Chicago architects and important in the history of Chicago and architectural history in general.
- The house is distinguished for its quality of detailing and craftsmanship in the Prairie style, including a gabled roof with extended eaves, especially fine first-story corner casement windows and second story windows detailed by abstract geometric ornamentation, plus a very early and unusual attached garage, particularly given that this is a relatively small house for a middle-class family.
- The interior of the Peters House features an innovative L-shaped or "open" floor plan characteristic of the Prairie style, "tent" ceilings, and a central brick fireplace which are features synonymous with the Prairie style.

Criterion 5: Important Architect

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Henry V. Peters House was designed by Walter Burley Griffin, a Prairie School architect significant in the history of the City of Chicago and world architecture.
- Beginning his career as a member of Frank Lloyd Wright's studio, Griffin is considered one of the City's most skilled designers in the Prairie School tradition. He was responsible for many significant Prairie style designs in and around Chicago, most notably the Emery House in Elmhurst, the Gauler twin houses in the Edgewater community, and the collection of seven houses in the block of 104th Place in the Beverly community, comprising the City's greatest concentration of Prairie-style architecture.
- Walter Burley Griffin was also an important early "land planner," whose projects ranged from small multi-property developments in Chicago to the internationally significant master plan for Canberra, the capital of Australia.
- The Peters House represents one of Griffin's finest Prairie-style designs and is his earliest expression of the style in Chicago and one of the earliest in his solo career.

It is one of his seminal works, bringing together all the features—the open plan, "tent" ceilings, distinctive window configurations, gabled roof forms with overhanging eaves, and vertical emphasis in the building's overall architectural expression (virtually unique to Griffin in Prairie-style residential architecture)—that would become hallmarks of his work.

Integrity Criteria

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architecture or aesthetic interest or value.

The Henry V. Peters House possesses excellent physical integrity, displaying through its site, scale and overall design, its historic relationship to the Irving Park community. Inappropriate changes to the building are few. Exterior changes to the building include replacement asphalt shingles, screen enclosure of the south porch, and window replacement of the 1918 addition. Major interior modifications include kitchen and bath modernization and replacement of historic lighting fixtures by historically inspired reproductions.

**SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL
AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based upon its preliminary evaluation of the Peters House, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as

- All exterior elevations of the house, including rooflines;
- The first floor plan of the house, including the entry, living room, dining room and central fireplace.

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A view of the west (front) elevation of the Peters House showing its distinctive arrangement of casement windows characteristic of the Prairie style.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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